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EXPERIENCE WITH ORAL EXAMINATIONS IN MODERN LANGUAGES

By PHILIP M. HAYDEN

SOME years ago when oral examinations were the subject of frequent discussions at meetings of teachers, I used to hear opinions expressed as to what could and could not be done in that line. Calculations were made that individual examinations would take from fifteen minutes to a half hour and that it would therefore be a physical impossibility to use them for admission to college. It was from that point of view that my first experience with oral examinations was particularly interesting. With a colleague I was called upon one summer four or five years ago to conduct the written and oral tests in French and Spanish for the Civil Service examinations for the position of court interpreter. The written test lasted about three hours and it was arranged that we should call out the candidates one by one for the oral test. Since this was an examination of interpreters, we decided to have them interpret, and this apparently simple conclusion appears never to have been thought of before for these examinations. After a few questions to get the man's origin, training and experience before us, we asked him to interpret between us, one taking the part of an examining magistrate—as we conceived him to be, since neither of us had been one or before one—and the other a complainant or a witness. We allowed our imaginations full play, and invented tales of robbery, assault and embezzlement which delighted us but which probably fell far short of the tragedy and comedy of a municipal court. We found that a short series of questions and answers of this sort were sufficient to test the capacity of the candidate, and when the supervisor asked if we could not speed up a little so as to finish with the whole group within the period of the written test, we cut down the time of each man until we were examining at the rate of twelve an hour, including consultation on grades, which we made while the next man was being called. Five minutes per candidate,

of which not over three and a half were actual examination, and this for a civil service test which could fairly be considered more important than college entrance. This was possible partly because we wasted no time on questions that could be answered by yes or no, or briefly without showing any real power, and because the requirement that he say a certain thing was far more stringent than a general conversation in which the candidate might say whatever he felt inclined or able to say. Instead of listening to generalities, we were able to set the man at the task approximately which he would have to perform. We increased, with the better candidates, the length of the statement which he was to remember and reproduce, and obtained a gauge of his power. One man who had already served as an interpreter in the immigration service surprised us. He was like a converting phonograph, taking a record of whole paragraphs and converting it without a change of order or the omission of a single point.

The candidates and their preparation were most varied, and most of them had acquired their languages entirely apart from schooling in this country or elsewhere. Hardly any were native to either French or Spanish, since these were secondary languages, Italian and Russian being the principal ones for these positions. Some of the young Italians and Russians, however, had learned their French in the public institutions of the city, and a few were able to pass, although it is not naturally to be expected that school and college training can suffice for such posts as these.

Our method of conducting the test was reported to the Board and made official, and when we were summoned some weeks later to examine a few more men, a clerk proceeded to instruct us in the method which we had ourselves introduced.

A second experience with oral examinations began a little over two years ago, when the Postal Censorship was established. A staff of several hundred readers was gradually organized, and since by far the largest number were needed in Spanish, the examinations in this language continued at frequent intervals during the winter and spring, most of the time about twice a week. The examination consisted of a short translation from a printed or typewritten text, followed by specimens of script of progressive difficulty to be deciphered and translated. A collection of letters and postcards of varying degrees of calligraphy was obtained as

specimens. Each examination took about ten minutes in this case since there was no desire to hurry the candidates. The candidates whom I saw, several hundred in number, had the widest possible variety of training. Many were native to the language, and others had studied it for a few months only. Two general observations were to be made. The script gave greater difficulty than might have been expected. Even in what anyone would call a legible hand, some letters may be slurred or carelessly formed, and the reader must know the language well enough to read by phrases rather than by separate signs in order to decipher them. On the other hand, some of the more experienced could read at a glance one particularly illegible card quite devoid of context, reporting safe arrival and greetings from Boston, in a scrawl that had cost me some minutes of study and—may I confess it?—some help from the friend who lent it to me. The second observation concerns translation and has two sides, one favorable and the other unfavorable. I found that translation is an artificial convention. Many persons who control two languages with almost equal ease and can express any idea in either are quite at a loss, if they have never practiced the school-boy art, to translate accurately from one into the other. In such cases it was fair to suppose that a little practice would remove the embarrassment. On the other hand, the translation test served to bring out the limitations of many candidates who had lived abroad and acquired considerable fluency in the spoken tongue, but who had never read much, and could not follow the vocabulary or the sentence structure of the written language. Generally they were not readers in any tongue. I recall one woman who claimed to have been a more or less official translator in various posts both in the Philippines and in America but who had no conception of accurate and complete translation. She was quite capable, as she showed, of deforming fundamentally the thought of a simple passage. I flunked her, and wondered if her work in any of her previous positions had ever been checked up. I suspect that many a commercial translator—to use the school-boy vernacular—gets away with murder, for his employer, by definition, is unable to verify or control his work.

One group of candidates included a large number of young Porto-Ricans whose English had been acquired in the schools of the island, and I must say that I gained a high opinion of the Porto-

Rican school system. They were distinctly well trained, not merely in language, but in intelligence and in the discipline of application. They tackled the translation with attention and with confidence, and in general with excellent results. Unfortunately most of them were not qualified by age and experience for the work of the censorship, just as one could not take a high school youth as a confidential responsible clerk.

Many Americans of mature years presented themselves and passed the examination. One I remember had no acquaintance with the language beyond a reading knowledge gained by himself after study of several other languages. His well trained mind had practically mastered both vocabulary and construction.

The most interesting group to me personally and professionally were the young students of both sexes, many of whom were entirely successful with the test after two or three years of study, and they were a class that the authorities were glad to employ. In one of the women's colleges a Spanish teacher had formed in the spring a special class to train for this work, and after examining three or four candidates prepared by her, I was able to report that any whom she recommended might be considered qualified without further test.

The foregoing experiences have little relation to the regular work of the schools and colleges, though they afforded opportunity for some observations and reflections.

The supplementary oral or aural tests for admission to college, known as *x* and *y*, have now been in operation at Columbia for three or four years. They are, I think, working satisfactorily from the point of view of the schools and of the college. The teachers in the preparatory schools need no longer feel that the time and attention which they are urged to give to the oral side of the training are entirely overlooked in entrance examinations. The college is able to determine whether the student is prepared to enter a class conducted chiefly or entirely in the foreign language. The method of the test is comparatively simple. There is a brief dictation exercise, then a passage read in the foreign language for reproduction in English in the elementary test, in the foreign language in the intermediate or advanced test, and some questions asked orally to be answered in the foreign language. In the elementary test these are fairly simple, based on general

knowledge and vocabulary, or on a brief passage which the candidates have had opportunity to read; in the more advanced tests the questions are more difficult and may be based upon a passage read aloud by the examiner. The test, it will be noted, is entirely a written one and tests the comprehension of the pupil but not his power to pronounce or converse. This is in order to examine a group of fair size in the minimum time, but it furnishes pretty well the desired data on his preparation and his qualifications for a given course in college. It would be easily possible to add an individual pronunciation test, each candidate to read a very few lines, once slowly to test the elements of pronunciation, and once as rapidly as he could to test his fluency and grasp of intonation. Two minutes per candidate would suffice. I do not see how a general conversation test could be handled rapidly and I do not know that even the pronunciation test is necessary, since, as I have already said, the present test gives the necessary information.

The chief point in the preparation of the tests is the necessity of making the intermediate and advanced tests really more advanced than the elementary. The tendency of oral work is to give "more of the same" with but little advance in difficulty and in vocabulary and in power of expression. The questions of the elementary paper may well be those which the student who has had fair oral practice may answer readily, but the advanced test should require an accurate comprehension of more extended, involved and rapid sentences, and more definite power of sentence structure for the replies. The student who passes the elementary test will enter an intermediate class where the foreign language need not be used exclusively. The candidate for the intermediate is seeking admission to classes conducted entirely in the foreign language, and should be made to show his ability to understand and express himself readily.

I believe that the continuance of these tests will have an excellent effect on the instruction in both the schools and the colleges. A standard of proficiency will gradually be recognized, and the means of attaining it will be more generally discovered and practiced. The student will realize that he can well give special attention to this side of his work, with growing satisfaction in his own increasing power. Once get them interested in the problem, and the more able and ambitious ones can be taught to give them-

selves regular exercises in forms and phrases, by trying mentally to express in the foreign language every-day actions and needs, by practicing the use of numbers through repeating the multiplication table, etc. I strongly believe in the introduction of free composition, based on the text read, in the third year of the high school and the second year, at least the second half of it, in college. The construction of even a few sentences summarizing his reading for the day or some part of it, will bring the student face to face with difficulties much more interesting to him and more profitable than the translation of set exercises. He finds at once phrases that he wants to use which are not in his vocabulary, and from the corrections on his paper he can build up a vocabulary of material which he himself has felt the want of, and which is the vocabulary he is going to need. Such composition exercises also furnish a preparation for discussion of the text in the class room, and thus serve a double purpose. The papers may be brief, and should be so in order not to overburden the teacher. There ought to be individual conferences such as are given on English themes, but we have allowed the English teachers and the science laboratories to steal a march on us in the giving of individual instruction, and shall doubtless have to wait a long while before public or official opinion will sanction the necessary increase in staff. In the meantime, a few minutes of comment in class by the teacher on the most common difficulties will accomplish a great deal.

To try to sum up this rather rambling record of experience, I find that oral or other examinations may be very definitely related to the result sought, and should be carefully prepared and graded with that intent; that individual oral examinations may be given with considerable speed, but that the form of entrance test now used in groups is successful. I believe that the continuance and spread of the present college entrance tests will have a beneficial influence on the study of foreign languages, by encouraging the effort to find and hire competent teachers, and encouraging these teachers to develop their work along the lines of the living language.

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